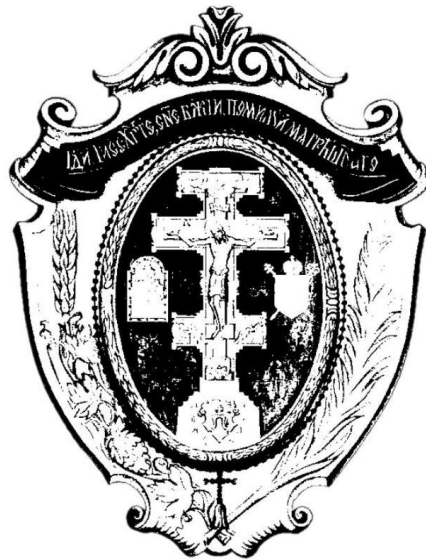


50 Thoughts of Elder Oleksandr

50 ДУМОК СТАРЦЯ ОЛЕКСАНДРА



Written by: Elder Oleksandr Kilar
Compiled by: Bishop Venedykt Aleksiychuk

Contents

Word About Elder Oleksandr

I. Understanding the Main Christian Truths

- Christianity
- Jesus Christ as the Center of Our Life
- Our Relationship with God
- The Road to God
- Divine Sonship
- God's Presence
- God's Blessing
- God's Will
- The Beatitudes
- Values

II. The Spiritual Life

- The Essence of the Spiritual Life
- Knowing God
- Holiness
- Prayer
- Growth
- Perfection

- Purity of Heart
- The Cross and Forgiveness
- The Image of the Desert Ascetic-Great-Schema Monk

III. The Human Person in Cooperation With God

- Freedom
- Choice
- Intellect
- The Action of the Holy Spirit
- Actions
- Service
- Why Withdraw Into Solitude
- Readiness for Change
- What Are Our Fruits

IV. Virtues

- What Are Virtues
- Love
- Love of Enemies
- Acceptance
- Peace

- Demandingness
- Simplicity
- Justice
- Self-Restraint (Temperance)
- Sacrificial Love
- Patience
- The Importance of Truth
- Gratitude

V. Sin and Its Consequences

- Sin
- Pride
- Divorce
- Anger
- Mammon
- May We Judge
- Thoughts
- Passions

VI. Let Us Preserve One Another for God

- The Present Prepares the Future

Word About Elder Oleksandr

By: Bishop Venedkyt (Aleksiychuk)

In the Church of God, from the time of the earthly life of Jesus Christ until now, there have been many righteous ones and saints. Only some of them are known to us, those whom we call beatified and canonized, yet the holiness of most remains unknown to us.

The figure of Elder Oleksandr is precious to all of us because he was our contemporary. We saw him, heard him, spoke with him, and prayed with him. We could “touch” him in our encounters and conversations.

Elder Oleksandr lived in the Holy Dormition Univ Lavra for more than ten years. He spent most of his life in enclosure. There he worked primarily on the *Christology*. This was the labor of his entire life. He left behind a great many materials on this topic, which still require thorough work. Nevertheless, it should be noted that at the beginning of 2025 one of the shortest versions of the *Christology* was published.

On Saturdays and Sundays (only on these days) our schemamonk would come out of his enclosure, and the monks, nuns, and faithful had the opportunity to speak with him.

During these days Elder Oleksandr also used the opportunity to offer various spiritual teachings and to have personal conversations with people. Therefore, this book is an attempt to gather and systematize the teachings of our ascetic, so that not only those who knew him, but others as well, might benefit from his instruction.

Of course, we do not know the full depth of the elder’s spiritual life, all his ascetic labors and prayers. Yet we wish to transmit those life-giving grains that we were able to gather.

Our Lord Jesus Christ revealed to us the eternal God. The elder embodied Christianity in his own life; he showed what a Christian ought to be. He did

not merely speak about Christianity—he incarnated it in his life. Everyone who encountered him knows that what mattered most was not what Elder Oleksandr said, but what he bore witness to by his example. From my own experience I can say that neither before nor after have I ever met anyone like him.

He was for us like one of the ancient ascetics whom we were deemed worthy to meet on our earthly path. And only now, when he is no longer among us, can we understand his teaching more deeply. When the Lord dwelt among the disciples and apostles, they were unable to know Him fully; only after the descent of the Holy Spirit did they realize His divinity. In the same way, we were not aware of the greatness and righteousness of our elder, for he was so simple and approachable that only now do we recognize whom the Lord placed on our life's path.

Elder Oleksandr left us much as an inheritance. We wished to preserve this legacy and share it with others. Yet this turned out to be difficult. First of all, because he did not write—he spoke—and this at times was difficult to render into text. Moreover, having lived many years in the English-speaking world, he used many English and diaspora expressions.

And in general, Elder Oleksandr did not teach systematic theology—he offered advice and expressed thoughts according to the needs of each person.

In short, it was not easy to find someone willing to work on this book. Therefore, I undertook this work myself; my labor was like the work of a restorer of an old icon: removing certain things (especially repetitions), supplementing others, transferring thoughts from his other sayings, and so forth. I am aware that I may not have conveyed everything with perfect precision. Yet I hope that with God's help I have succeeded in bringing to readers the seeds of faith, love, wisdom, and service of Elder Oleksandr. I am confident that these seeds will be life-giving.

Part I: Understanding the Main Christian Truths

1. CHRISTIANITY

The foundation of Christianity is life in Jesus Christ. Since we are Christians, we must rightly understand who Jesus is and what He taught. He transmitted His teaching better than anyone who ever lived on this earth, for He was the Son of God and had the deepest relationship with God. Yet He also understood human beings exceedingly well, for He was the Son of Man; that is, His person possessed two natures — divine and human — united perfectly in the hypostatic union.

When we speak about Jesus and His being, everything must be connected with us and with our lives, with our practical actions, with what we are to learn from Him. Jesus never acted, nor does He now act, only for Himself. For example, at the moment of His baptism, when the voice proclaimed, “This is My beloved Son,” these words were spoken not only for Him but also for us. Jesus acted — and continues to act — for our sake. What He accomplished is truly a spiritual revolution.

Jesus Christ desires to show in His own person the invisible and eternal God. He manifests and incarnates Him. God allows Himself to be known through the Holy Spirit. Jesus also “incarnates” the Holy Spirit, for “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). It is like the sun — the Father, the rays — the Holy Spirit, the warmth-light — Jesus Christ. The foundation of knowing Jesus Christ is His personal knowledge of the Father: “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30).

We experience Jesus Christ and His passage — His Pascha, the passage from sin. We, too, mystically pass along that same path. We will be formed according to His designs, acting as He acted, living according to His being, becoming another Christ, a new Adam.

2. JESUS CHRIST AS THE CENTER OF OUR LIFE

It is important to believe, to entrust ourselves to God, and to recognize that everything He sends into our lives is meant to make us holy. We have only one task — to be as Jesus was and to live as He lived. Of course, we will never become a “fourth person” of the Trinity, but we can become like Jesus Christ within the limits of our human capacities, as far as we can through the action of the Holy Spirit. This is not a demand, but an invitation.

If a car does not run, something must be repaired or replaced. In the same way, we must be transformed and remade into another Jesus, or into the Adam before the fall, who was filled with God’s grace. To achieve this, we must first understand Jesus Christ: who He is, what He is like. For when we understand who Jesus Christ is, we then become like Him. According to our inner nature, so will we act; for each of us is in life what we are interiorly, regardless of what we may temporarily pretend to be.

On the other hand, we as Christians are part of a religious chain of development rooted in ancient cultures. Our beginnings lie there, distant though they may be, yet from there begins our awareness — our understanding of how we come to God.

3. OUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD

In all the Gospels, and especially in that of John, we find teaching about the relationship of Jesus to the Father. On this basis we must build our own relationship with the Lord and with other people. This is why it is so important to know Holy Scripture, for it shapes our person and gives us wisdom. The foundation of the spiritual life of Jesus Christ was that He knew God the Father. “I watch the Father, and whatever the Father does, that is what I do” (cf. Jn 5:19–20).

Everything Jesus does teaches us that we are to act in the same way, so as to reveal God to every person. He shows us who the eternal God is, and also how our sins affect Him. Yet the Lord continually receives us, forgives us, and loves us. This becomes for us a mystical lesson whose essence is that we must be in union with God and love constantly. We must also grow in love toward ever greater perfection.

It is important to read Holy Scripture, for it structures and forms us. One who knows it can be considered wise. God blesses such wisdom. Yet to be a knower of the Bible does not simply mean to be informed about it. Far more important is to be personally transformed by this knowledge — to become what it teaches. For in the understanding of Jesus Christ, “knowledge” means *being*. To be like God: pure being.

We must remember that our spiritual growth occurs gradually. When a person slowly matures and enters this narrow path of love, there is no longer sin there, but the fullness of being in the Holy Spirit. My thoughts, desires, feelings, and all else are already in the Lord. Then I am no longer focused only on earthly things, but increasingly enter into what is God’s.

God is always at work within us. He acts with a single purpose — to sanctify and save. This accumulation of virtues reminds me of a little ant that carries a grain of sand and moves it from one place to another, where it builds. In the same way, God always “works” in us and sanctifies us, changing and transforming us atom by atom, cell by cell. He works like that ant.

The Lord draws us ever closer to holiness. He constantly builds and strengthens virtues within us. When I sin, I break them apart. What does God do? He goes to the place where I have sinned in order to repair it — and He continues building. Yet if I had not destroyed that part, He could have immediately continued building my holiness rather than spending time repairing what was ruined. Therefore, it is not worth sinning, for by doing so we lose our precious time. And life is unique and unrepeatable. It is far better that God continually

build. It is very unfortunate when our sin shatters what the Lord has built. Sin is not worth it, because we waste the time of our sanctification.

Heaven is a state, not a place. Therefore, when here on earth I enter into relationship with God, heaven already begins for me — the heaven in which we will experience an indescribable union with the Father.

4. THE ROAD TO GOD

The first path to God arises from love. Love comes from the Holy Spirit; therefore, we act as the Holy Spirit acts — we leave everything and move forward, for our goal is love.

The second path is the choice between two roads — darkness and light. We abandon everything that is not from God. This is the ascetical path.

Both roads are good, and each person chooses his own. Ultimately, every road leads to union with God.

The way of love is the direction Jesus Christ Himself followed — movement in love. It is important that love always dwell within us, that it be, figuratively speaking, the first and last action in each of us. This is why the narrow path is the path of love, the effort to do everything in the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ goes to Jerusalem knowing that He must die there, and He dies in love. To respond differently would have meant not listening to the Father or acting out of passion. Christ takes upon Himself the entire sin of humanity and by His death redeems the human race — and He does this freely.

Let us imagine that one of us would willingly go to a death preceded by terrible moral and physical torments. Just look at the final moment of Jesus on the cross: His body in pain and wounds, no longer able to struggle. Jesus dies. Yet He took all of this upon Himself freely, out of love. On the cross His earthly ministry comes to its end.

5. DIVINE SONSHIP

Everyone who receives Jesus becomes a child of God, yet still carries many sins and is not yet fully ready to be a son or daughter of the Lord. Figuratively speaking, there are certain degrees of divine sonship. The highest degree is when we act only in love and thus pass through the narrow gate, as Jesus says. Then we begin to manifest in ourselves the first signs of true divine sonship.

Jesus gives us the rules for attaining authentic righteousness. Yet in the Gospels His teachings are not presented in a systematic form, but delivered in various circumstances of life and ministry. In the Sermon on the Mount these teachings are gathered together to a greater extent, yet even there there is no complete systematic exposition. Therefore, a person reading Scripture may at times struggle to understand how to connect all the teachings.

It is presented this way because the Gospels reflect a Semitic, non-sequential manner of expressing the path of righteousness, for the Semitic peoples of Jesus' time were more intuitive than rationalistic. Of course, not all were so; some were indeed logical thinkers—intellectuals—and the Pharisees themselves were often intellectually mature.

Nevertheless, speaking generally, the books of the Old and New Testaments do not contain a systematic methodology or a logical progression. This is understandable, for Jesus spoke to a Semitic people, intuitively sensing them, preaching within their culture and mentality. Even so, in the Gospel chapter describing the Sermon on the Mount there is already a certain order from which we can discern a deepening logic.

6. GOD'S PRESENCE

When we pray, it is important to become aware of ourselves in the presence of God. Then the Lord will manifest Himself in us more and more. We will feel peace and calm, which will also give joy from God's presence.

We often want the Lord to do this or that which we consider humanly important or necessary. But God loves us, and therefore He will do what is truly good for us, not everything we request. If He were to fulfill all our wishes in succession, we would become proud and arrogant. For our sake God comes to us gradually.

Whether we are praying in church or engaged in some activity, God remains unchanging in His attitude toward us. God is living, and we must come to know and understand this truth. Faith gives us the understanding that the Lord is with us always and hears us at every moment. Only our inner ears and eyes are not yet developed enough to receive Him, because God's action is very delicate and holy, whereas we live more in material things and thus are unable to experience the Lord.

God dwells in us through the Holy Spirit. The Lord will never reject a person but will transform them, acting toward them in love. When the divine "I" displaces the human "I" within me, then I am being sanctified. My movements, thoughts, and actions are sanctified.

7. GOD'S BLESSING

Through His blessing Jesus clearly manifested—and continues to manifest—God's love for every person. We often compared this blessing to the sun continually shining without end. The final expression of His love Jesus showed on the cross, when He accepted the thief who hung at His right side. That man had been one of the rebels of Barabbas' group, captured for killing a Roman. Christ receives the thief because of his sincere repentance and his recognition of God in his final moment. Jesus opens the gates of the Heavenly Kingdom even to him.

Thus, God's love is not like human love—often subjective, self-interested, and changeable. Jesus shows on the cross God's constant love; He forgives sins and

loves the human person to the end. By accepting both the righteous and sinners, Christ showed the God who receives all, loves all, and blesses all.

During the Sermon on the Mount Jesus receives everyone: the righteous and the unrighteous. He blesses all, manifesting thereby God's goodness and His favor, His love that grants eternal life. The blessing of Christ is unceasing, continual, for Jesus radiates God's nature, which eternally loves us.

As the Gospel testifies, people of various degrees of sinfulness and righteousness appeared throughout Jesus' life: the Samaritan woman, the prodigal son, Mary the sister of Martha, Nicodemus who needed explanation about birth in the Holy Spirit, and the poor who were possessed by evil spirits. Even the apostles possessed not only virtues but also sins. Despite this, Christ accepted and blessed all, bearing witness: God loves you.

The blessing of God is God's presence in all things. Then everything on earth has the capacity to spiritualize us, to unite us with God, and to keep us in a state of prayer. The Lord is good; He could not create anything that would distance me from Him—except my sin.

8. GOD'S WILL

Two steps are essential for us. The first is to accept that God knows and permits everything that occurs in our lives. The second is to accept that everything in our life, and in the world as a whole, happens for sanctification and salvation. The essence of every event in our life is the perfection of God.

Jesus Christ said that without the will of God not even a hair from our head can fall to the ground. It is important to accept this and remember that God knows about every situation. Could it be possible that God would not know what is happening in the world? Of course not, for if everything occurred on its own, that would contradict the very essence of the created order. We acknowledge perfect principles and laws in physics, chemistry, and other

sciences; therefore there are perfect divine principles and laws, and if we believe in the one God, we must accept that He stands behind everything that happens in our life.

If we accept this, then we must take the next step — to accept that God is perfect. Were the Lord imperfect, we could not call Him eternal; for eternity and perfection are intimately connected. And wherein lies His perfection? In His perfect action toward human beings. He has only one goal, one desire, and one activity concerning us — our sanctification, that we may become holy, for He is holy.

9. BEATITUDES

In the time of Christ, the beatitudes were a manifestation of God's grace. Jesus called the people who came to listen to Him *blessed*, beloved of God. Jesus' attitude toward the people differed completely from that of the Pharisees and scribes. When Christ delivered the Sermon on the Mount, the Pharisees and scribes labeled the people as cursed and unsaved, because these individuals did not know and did not observe the prescriptions handed down by their forefathers, which Moses had received from God on Mount Sinai. On the Mount of Beatitudes Jesus does not reject these poor ones; rather, He receives them in the name of God. He calls them blessed and teaches them about God's love, about God Himself, and about the salvation God offers them.

Christ gives new moral instructions and guidelines for conduct and life. These reveal to us knowledge about God, about love, about the Heavenly Kingdom, and other spiritual realities. At the same time, alongside the various instructions, Christ offers moral teachings. These consist in the imitation of God with love, which Jesus defines as perfection.

Chapter 5 of the Gospel of Matthew recounts that Jesus taught: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Mt 5:9). The persons in the parables could also be called children of God if they reconciled with one

another and reached agreement. For Jesus it is essential that every action, every movement of the soul be rooted in God; for if thoughts, feelings, or conversations do not originate from God, they are negative and sinful.

10. VALUES

In earthly life, the attitude toward the righteous is not always positive. Their life stance—one that does not submit to evil—can awaken hostility in others, especially in people who lack good qualities and are instead filled with sin. Yes, all of us are sinners to some degree, but here the reference is to persons who continually remain in grave sins.

In such a situation, when the righteous person preaches, speaks, or directs his word to these individuals, he often encounters rejection, because the listeners resist him as someone who threatens their established values and life priorities. These individuals usually do not reflect on the fact that the real cause lies within themselves—that their values and judgments are false. They cling to their convictions because they align with their passions and ambitions, whereas an encounter with a holy person suddenly disrupts this equilibrium and introduces something that calls into question the value system they have built over many years. These people subconsciously sense a threat to their ideology, but cannot grasp its cause; they cannot understand their own “unholiness,” their own evil. They are so rooted in cruelty that they are prepared to destroy the saint or the one who represents goodness. For in defending their evil, they openly set themselves against the righteous. Having no understanding of God, standing apart from the side of goodness, they defend their own passion. Not believing in God, they cannot perceive the ground on which they stand. They think that the temporary things they live for are valuable and best for them. They constantly pursue the temporary—that is, human and worldly—goods, placing them first, while they are unable to comprehend holiness, for their values are of this world.

These are the priorities of a person who lives in sin. Such a person is often filled with passions, pride, and injustice, and therefore harms others. He does evil to others in order to exalt himself. Such a person does not radiate goodness; rather, he brings evil into the world. The saint, however, represents goodness, and through his holiness he gives the world its greatest good. He performs good deeds so that others around him may feel positive, comforted, and filled with life.

Chapter II: The Spiritual Life

11. THE ESSENCE OF SPIRITUAL LIFE

What is the spiritual life of a person? It is the transformation of one's physical nature into a spiritual one. This occurs through the law of love, for love itself seeks union. And the final, highest step is to be in union with God. For Jesus says: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30), "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9), and even assures us: "No one knows the Father except the Son" (Mt 11:27). Why? Because the Father dwells in Jesus as Jesus dwells in the Father. Jesus knows the Father as He knows Himself. They are united through love.

Adam and Eve destroyed their spiritual life and instead received a physical, emotional, passionate one. Jesus Christ did the complete opposite: He transformed bodily life and brought us — our fallen nature — to spiritual life.

In paradise there was a tree, and it led Adam and Eve to the fall. A tree is also involved in the death of Jesus Christ — the tree on which He dies — but this tree gives us the possibility of becoming partakers of eternal life. Adam and Eve, through a tree, lead us away from spiritual life and into passionate life. Jesus Christ, through a tree, leads us away from passionate life and back to spiritual life — that is, to paradise.

12. KNOWING GOD

Regarding the knowledge of God, Jesus says that He and the Father are one (Jn 10:30), meaning that what He does is what the Father does in Him (cf. Jn 14:10).

There are three forms of knowledge:

- Identification — I know someone or something and love them deeply; then I

identify myself with them in order to become like them.

- Identity — inwardly I become what You, O God, are within me.
- Metamorphosis — where I become You, and You become me. Here there is no distinction, for we are one, a single whole.

Let us accept everything that happens and is transformed within us, for in acceptance there is no disadvantage or suffering. Let us always accept reality. Let our work be like the altar on which the priest offers sacrifice to God. Yet because we often manifest excessive activism in life, we do not always make correct decisions. If we err or do something wrong, let us not scourge ourselves, for God continues to love us.

13. HOLINESS

Holiness is Jesus' invitation to perfection. In essence, holiness means becoming like God — having a heart filled with great love and constantly perfecting oneself in that love. Holiness, love illuminated by it, is the most important quality. It is therefore the desire to be as the Lord God is. In the book of Leviticus God says to Moses: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2).

To be without sin is to be holy, for it means having nothing that creates a sinful condition, nothing that binds us to what is external, worldly, or sinful.

Without sin, one is no longer attached to the world. Yet the mind and will continue to live. Desire always seeks fullness. Formerly, under the influence of sin, the will sought fullness in attachment to what is worldly. Now, without sin, it seeks fullness in God — and finds Him. In the heart one discovers the Kingdom of Heaven, angels, demons, and the inner spiritual life. The external world no longer holds interest; outwardly one only loves.

Flawlessness in the spiritual life of a Christian is extremely important, for by drawing nearer to God, we become like Him. The Lord is the central Being for

each of us. As we grow in perfection, we are filled with His Spirit and with all His gifts and fruits.

A person filled with holiness becomes spiritually beautiful. When goodness fills the heart, their truly Christian moral behavior attracts others. The righteous person is like a flower in bloom. He radiates goodness. A holy person is an image of God Himself. At the same time, holiness shows how it is to be attained.

Holiness is above all love. To speak of love in our Christian understanding is to speak of holiness. In both love and holiness there is no selfishness; both are filled with virtues.

It is precisely a person's inner holiness that enables them to feel evil intensely — especially the evil we do to God and also the evil we do to others when they sin.

14. PRAYER

Prayer is the greatest enemy of distraction. When we gradually free ourselves from various thoughts during prayer, we begin to live more and more in the Holy Spirit. And when we rid ourselves of passions, we grow more deeply in the virtue of love. Therefore, our goal is to open ourselves ever more to the Holy Spirit.

When we pray with the understanding that the Lord loves us and has given us everything, then prayer becomes peaceful. A state arises in which, at a certain moment, we no longer pray for this or that intention, but surrender everything to the Lord and lift everything in our heart up to God. Intuitively, we feel our desire for holiness. This is a very essential sign: that we wish to give everything to God. Not in words, but in the heart.

Prayer is a great instrument of sanctification. It is what washes away our sins. By removing sin, prayer draws us closer to God.

The more we pray, the more God lives in us, and the more we act in God; thus these heavenly laws begin to operate already here on earth — and this is what we call a miracle. If a person opens more to God through prayer, sanctifying suffering, and spiritual reading, then what that person desires, consciously or unconsciously, in accord with God's will, comes to pass for them.

In the Western Church it is often said that prayer is received by the mind. The Eastern Church teaches that a person receives prayer in a unified, whole manner. In prayer we always stand before God, before the One who always loves us, even when we sin. For the Lord, we are always precious. When we turn away from Him, we become inwardly a little “darker” and possess less love. The Lord, however, always speaks to us; yet He manifests Himself first of all in silence — for example, in the Holy Eucharist, hidden in the tabernacle.

15. GROWTH

To grow spiritually is like traveling into a new and unknown country, where there is fear and uncertainty. The knowledge of Jesus may seem difficult and confusing. It is hard to grasp God's plan for us. Sometimes we think: “If I am a sinner, can I rightly see my path to Him? How can I evaluate what I must do to draw near to Him?”

Each of us is invited to come to the Lord, though He forces no one. Jesus says: “Whoever wishes to follow Me...,” “Whoever wishes to be perfect....” Many people think in stereotypes: if I live according to the Gospel and the Commandments, if I do God's will, then I will lose certain joys of life; I will lose something in this world. Therefore, it seems better to remain in the lifestyle of this world and make use of it. For if I grow in God and seek His will, I will surely lose something of this world.

Yet a fundamental question arises: do we wish in this life to grow and develop? True growth occurs when we draw closer to God. Our growth and transformation consist in giving up one thing in order to acquire another.

Often what frightens us most is the thought that we will be deprived of something in this world. If this is so, then we perceive our own growth and development in God as a kind of death. Ultimately, this is true — we die a little. But what do we die to? We die to the lifestyle of this world, to certain bodily comforts. The important question is: am I willing to give them up or not?

If we grow spiritually and sin less, we grow in virtues, in purity of heart — meaning continual growth in sinlessness. We also grow in humility, let go of ambition, and become like children. Jesus therefore said that we must become like children (cf. Mt 18:3; Lk 18:17).

Growth in God means that I enter a new way of being, that I die to my ego, which wants to manage my personal life in a human way. Ego is what creates in me the awareness of myself, mostly on a bodily level, especially in what is passionate. We essentially have two “selves”: the human, that is bodily, and the divine. The Lord gave us a certain “self,” for example, the Ten Commandments, and He desires that these commandments be fulfilled. But my body has its own commandments and its own desires.

The spiritual life, and growth in it, consists in allowing our human self to step down gradually from its pedestal, and the divine self — that is, God Himself — to take its place. When God becomes the center of my person, where my human self previously stood, then the divine self governs my person, as the human self once did.

But how do we attain this divine self? By acting as fully as possible in love and in virtue. The divine self is formed in us through the practice of all the means that shape the spiritual person. It is important to say that the divine self and the Holy Spirit are the same. We are formed for actions of divine love through prayer, through reading the Bible, the Holy Fathers, and other spiritual literature.

16. PERFECTION

Human perfection has three degrees.

When we love ever more and ever more deeply, we sin less and less. When we turn away from the path of sin, we become practicing Christians: we accept Christ's teaching, begin to believe in God, and love our neighbors. Yet mortal sin still influences us. When we are still capable of falling under its power, though we already have some experience of God, we have made the first step toward perfection.

If a person grows in love, with God, then they move to the second degree of perfection — the state of venial sins (they fall into mortal sin very rarely). They still commit venial sins because they have not yet overcome their bad habits. By doing good and praying continuously, a person gradually conquers the inclinations to sin.

When a person practices virtue unceasingly, they reach the third stage of perfection — the degree of minimal sins. Such a person may occasionally fall into a venial sin, but practically never into a mortal one. Minimal, small sins do not create a chasm in their relationship with God.

Ascending the steps of perfection fosters inner refinement. When we reach the point where we struggle not with external sins but only with what arises from within, then we acquire wisdom and expand our knowledge of God. The highest degree of perfection is practically unattainable for anyone, for only Jesus Christ was entirely perfect.

We must understand that we need time and effort on our path to perfection. We will never become perfect in a single moment. Let us imagine our spiritual growth as a multi-story building with stairs. We ascend these stairs from the first floor upward. This ascent through life often includes periods in which we need support from others, the solving of certain problems, and understanding. We pass through various emotional states and do not always grasp clearly ourselves, God, or other people.

Again and again, we discover in ourselves new desires and a vision for something higher. Then we feel the strength and ability to rise upward once more. This is the time indicating a need for change: we have reached a certain level, and God calls us further. God usually always calls toward change. He shows us where we stand in our spiritual condition and calls us to new growth. He again points out a new area that needs resolution, and we set off to a new level of ascent.

When a person reaches the state of perfection, they understand what Jesus accomplished on the cross: He took upon Himself all the sins of humanity and gave Himself out of love, never once falling into passion. When we reach life in the Holy Spirit, we die to our sin (fulfilling Christ's command to die to sin and live for God), and we become persons who love entirely, drawing our life-orientation, actions, and thoughts from the Holy Spirit. Then, as St. Paul says, the world becomes crucified to us, and we reproduce in our life what Christ did for us: we become perfect as the Father is perfect. Each person arrives at this gradually, in his or her own way.

17. PURITY OF HEART

What does it mean to be pure of heart? In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ teaches that the pure in heart shall see God (Mt 5:8). They will not see Him with physical eyes, though even the Old Testament prophets once glimpsed reflections of God's majesty — for example, Isaiah saw God on a throne with angels singing around Him, "Holy, holy, holy." Ezekiel beheld God in the majesty of His power, surrounded by cherubim. Daniel also saw the Lord upon a throne, revealing symbolically the truth of God's greatness. Even in these symbolic visions — the throne and God the King — a true spiritual reality was revealed to the prophets.

When Jesus speaks of purity of heart, He directs us toward the ideal of righteousness, encouraging purity of thought, purity of desire, and purity of

intention. He later adds: “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” (Mt 5:29). This is an allegorical expression. Why does He say this? Because “it is better for you that one of your members perish than that your whole body be thrown into hell” (Mt 5:29).

Purity of heart leads us directly to God and to His perfection. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that those with pure hearts will see God. And it is truly so, because this happens within us through the Spirit of God — that is, through the Holy Spirit. It occurs to the extent that we allow God to do this within us, to dwell ever more deeply in our heart and mind. I say “ever more deeply” because the Spirit of God is always within us as the principle and foundation of our life. But in the one who acquires purity of heart, God is present more profoundly and manifests Himself more fully.

Why is purity of heart accessible to all? Because it is God’s will to dwell within us so that we may experience Him. Jesus uses the word “to know” to describe this experience. To experience God deeply, to experience His presence, means for us to be in union with God. This develops gradually, in proportion to a person’s growth in purity of heart.

For the pure of heart, the Kingdom of Heaven is always open, for purity of heart is the Kingdom of Heaven — Heaven itself. Our existence in time, that is, the fact that we live within time, prevents us from easily sensing and abiding in the eternal state where God dwells.

To consider a heart pure, it is not necessary to be perfect in the absolute sense. One’s heart may be pure, figuratively speaking, even at ninety percent or at eighty percent. The essence is this: a pure heart is a heart filled with the Holy Spirit. We may also say that purity of heart is our freedom from sin. And sin is any word, thought, feeling, desire, or judgment that contradicts the Holy Spirit and, therefore, contradicts God Himself.

Every moment of life, every stage, every event can contribute to a person’s growth in God’s perfection, even when a person lives alone with little contact with others. If, for example, such a solitary person drops something on the floor

and picks it up with irritation, that gesture is a passion; it could just as easily have been done calmly and thus virtuously. In every moment of time, in every circumstance, a person can grow in perfection. And every action we perform affects us, shaping us as persons, making us more or less sinful according to our choices. In this way our spiritual personality is built.

18. THE CROSS AND FORGIVENESS

On the cross, Jesus redeemed, forgave, and received all the evil of humanity. This act of the Messiah is a profound lesson for us as Christians. During His passion and crucifixion He never once insulted anyone and never acted out of passion. He always loved and continues to love as God loves. They curse Christ, mock Him, beat Him, reproach Him — and He continues to love.

He is unjustly condemned to death. He is betrayed, yet He continues to love, accepting all unbearable pains and sufferings. To *receive* — to accept — is the first step of love. Jesus accepts everything: all sufferings, humiliations, insults. He forgives all. Strictly speaking, the Lord had no reason to forgive anyone, because He never took offense; He always loves.

We already learn about forgiveness in the Old Testament. Christ's forgiveness is its continuation — the action of the God of love. We turn away from the Lord, but He never stops loving. Thus, when St. Peter asked how many times he must forgive his brother, Jesus answered: seventy times seven. The number seven was symbolic for the Jews, signifying fullness. This symbolism comes from Babylon, where it was believed that God looked upon the world through seven planets.

Thus the number seven became a symbol of God's presence. Jesus teaches Peter to forgive always. Why? Because God always forgives. Why did Jesus never act out of passion? Because the Lord always loves. On the cross, Jesus gave us the greatest lesson of the constant, faithful, sacrificial love of God for humanity — the lesson of always loving.

What does forgiveness mean? If God always loves, how can He forgive, since He never becomes offended by us? Indeed, God never stops loving us; yet when we sin, we turn away from God and fill ourselves with worldliness and materialism, and our conscience becomes hardened. Our subconsciousness absorbs passions and also becomes hardened. If the sin is great, it affects a person strongly. When we sin against our neighbor or against God, we fill ourselves with that sin. This means we close ourselves off from God. Yet He never ceases loving me, and when I change or forgive the one who offended me, I open myself again to God.

Jesus never responded with anger to those who scourged Him. He never fell into passion; He remained humble. He accepted all torments, to the final moment, to the words "*It is finished,*" and He loved through all of it. Christ reveals the eternal divine love and forgiveness: "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Lk 23:34). He forgives even His executioners, for they believed they were defending the Law, and they were unaware that they were doing wrong — they did not understand their sin (cf. Jn 15:22). Had Jesus not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse (cf. Jn 15:23). "*He who does not love Me does not love My Father*" (cf. Jn 15:24). And He continues: if I had not done among them works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both Me and My Father. But this happened so that the word written in their Law might be fulfilled: "*They hated Me without cause*" (cf. Jn 15:26; 31).

19. THE IMAGE OF THE DESERT ASCETIC-GREAT SCHEMA MONK

I will say a few words about the spiritual condition of a person who, regardless of life circumstances, attains the highest spiritual level — the desert ascetic, the monk of the Great Schema.

Every seeker of God must experience in life certain signs and fruits according to their inner state and according to how God guides them, regardless of whether the person is a monk, a servant of God (a priest or deacon), or a layperson.

The Great Schema is distinctive in that a monk receives certain elements of monastic vesture which carry symbolic meaning and indicate his ascent to a higher, more perfect state. The striving for perfection answers Jesus Christ's words, recorded by the evangelist Matthew: "*Be perfect as your Father is perfect*" (Mt 5:48).

Of course, the higher state of perfection of a Great Schema monk depends on his progress within it. What, then, are the attainments of one who has reached this exalted monastic state — the state that includes all virtues, everything holy, good, and wise, and personally brings intimate union with God?

This is the attainment that Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, calls *purity of heart*. Having acquired purity of heart, the Great Schema monk fulfills the teaching of Jesus: "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength*," that is, love God in all and above all. The monk of the Great Schema has taken the best of human thought and intellect, and the best of human feeling. Thus he becomes peaceful and serene in everything he does. The Spirit of God is eternally peaceful and serene, but humanity is not, for it acts according to passions and its emotional states. When these thoughts and feelings depart because we have uprooted them, then the thoughts and feelings of the Great Schema monk are moved and guided by God. The Holy Spirit now

gives the monk the foundation for his thoughts, words, feelings, and other faculties, imparting His own holiness to them.

Thus the Great Schema monk is able to see God even in dark hours and difficult moments of life. He will always seek Him.

The Great Schema monk knows that the highest spiritual attainment — holiness — is a matter of *being*: of becoming as God is — holy, pure, innocent, capable of loving, forgiving, accepting, being accessible, truthful, just, and humble. And if the Great Schema monk is in solitude, he will contemplate God, to Whom he has given his life in this world. And he will become ever more like God, fulfilling Christ's words about perfection.

The Great Schema monk, dwelling in the higher state of perfection, is not susceptible to negative worldly influences, for he acts under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Having renounced sin and been cleansed of passions, he directs his mind and feelings toward greater openness to the Spirit of God, Who ever dwells within him.

Chapter III: The Human Person in Cooperation with God

20. FREEDOM

God acts within us and grants us free will so that we may respond to Him. Often we are too weak to answer actively. Yet when a person reaches a certain spiritual stage, they become fully surrendered to the Lord—that is, they receive Him, the Holy Spirit, and all of God’s workings within them. God expects only one thing from such a person: complete openness, the kind that belongs almost exclusively to small children. I compare such openness to the open mouth of a little child waiting for its mother to place a spoonful of food inside.

There is a stage in the spiritual life when one does not need to do anything by oneself. God nourishes the person in faith, hope, and love, giving spiritual growth and theological wisdom. What can we do to make God’s work easier, so that He may help us grow in these virtues? Nothing. The only requirement is to remain in a peaceful, prayerful state; everything else God Himself will accomplish. God is the One who feeds us. The Spirit whom He gives will act through us. He strengthens our faith, love, and other virtues, helping us grow particularly in humility and patience.

It is as though God says, “This is what separates you from Me. I know you, and now you can overcome this within yourself.” His action purifies us, though it pains us because we have grown accustomed to our passions. Thus, no matter how negative, complex, or difficult the situation may be, it is in fact secondary. Behind every situation stands God and His action. And He acts solely out of love for every one of us. Yet we do have free will, and with the help of the Holy Spirit we must transform our own will and our heart. When the Holy Spirit comes to govern all these things, God can act in us more fully and more completely.

21. CHOICE

In every life situation there is the possibility of choice.

For example, if we are angry with someone, if we feel resentful toward a person, we can express it—then passion will be at work within us. Or we can remain silent, endure, or speak gently without condemnation—in that case, the Holy Spirit acts in us.

A person chooses depending on who is stronger in the heart: passion or the Holy Spirit. Thus, if we sense hostility toward someone and anger fills both our consciousness and subconscious, then passion and evil dominate. But if we live in a state of love, we can respond with love. The Christian ideal is a life of love under the action of the Holy Spirit.

The more a person advances in spiritual life, the narrower the road becomes. It is extremely important to pay attention to our actions, because actions form our state of prayer. This is the path that leads us to God. The sinful path is called wide. Jesus Christ calls us to walk the narrow road and to pass through the narrow gate. Many enter through the wide gate—those who live by their passions—but that road leads to destruction. Only the narrow road leads to eternal life, to fullness of life even here on earth. Only the narrow road leads through the narrow gate.

What is the narrow road for us? It is the state in which we sin less and less. Figuratively speaking, it is when our actions are practically free of sin. Then the Holy Spirit lives within us and acts freely. A person then thinks, speaks, acts, and resolves problems with love. Their road is narrow because they have reduced all their thoughts, actions, and words to one inner movement—love. This narrow road is what leads a person through the narrow gate. The wide road cannot pass through it.

Whoever increasingly lives by the Holy Spirit preserves purity of heart, walks the narrow road, and draws near to the narrow gate. “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24), says the Evangelist. Whoever builds their life upon the Holy Spirit becomes like

God and draws the motives of their actions, words, and thoughts not from their own intellect, experience, or passion, but from the Holy Spirit.

Only one who travels the narrow road can pass through the narrow gate. Then come the higher degrees of perfection, where one no longer needs to battle external sins because they are practically gone; only their roots remain. Thus the person attains a higher state of perfection. How did Jesus call the rich young man? “If you wish to be perfect...” (Mt 19:21). Therefore, by “selling” the treasures of this world, we receive the eternal Treasure. When we die to sin, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. We can grow in love and fulfill all the commandments, but we must narrow ourselves, act in love, so that we may pass through the narrow gate (cf. Mt 5:1–12).

Jesus desires that a person always choose to act out of love and not be marked by the influence of passion. Thus the task of a Christian is to be filled with the Holy Spirit, to learn to acquire virtues, and to conquer passions. This is part of Christ’s teaching—only half the journey. The other half is to turn away from passion. Together these form the whole path that shapes us into children of God.

22. INTELLECT

The scribes considered the healthiest trait of a person to be a sound intellect—right reason that perceives and reveals truth. Yet in the teaching of Jesus, it is not the human being alone who perceives and reveals truth, but the Holy Spirit through the person, through the one rooted in the Holy Spirit. Then the intellect and thoughts of that person are inspired by the Holy Spirit. An intellect that relies solely on human reasoning grasps and structures reality only within the limits of the knowledge of this world. Philosophy, for example, operates with the logical concepts and understandings present in the world. This elevates a person to some extent, but it can never bring one to the highest stage—that is, union with God. To attain this union, human knowledge, effort,

or experience is insufficient; one must be open to the action of the Holy Spirit. Philosophy represents the logic and understanding of this world, but only the Holy Spirit creates within the person concepts and insights that reach both the mind and the heart.

The Pharisees believed that right reason and intellect must inevitably lead a person to knowledge of the truth; therefore their interpretations fit into strict rational schemes. Jesus warned them: your understanding does not lead to the Kingdom of Heaven, for your manner of thinking is too human. Knowledge of what is good or evil is important but insufficient on its own; it must lead to spiritual growth.

23. THE ACTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The one who knows and experiences the Holy Spirit practically does not need the commandments. For God's laws merely inscribe on paper what is already contained within the Holy Spirit. Thus, whoever knows the Holy Spirit already knows the commandments. When the Holy Spirit acts in a person, He makes that person honest and loving. The individual then acts in virtue, patience, gentleness, and goodness. Concerning His fruits, Scripture says: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22). When the Holy Spirit works in us, we sense these fruits. And the one who acts in the Holy Spirit behaves exactly as St. Paul describes.

24. DEEDS

Every action matters, and our concrete deeds reveal who we truly are. Let us remember Christ's words addressed to us: "You are the temple of the Holy Spirit" (cf. 1 Cor 6:19). A person cannot control another, but one can watch over the correctness of one's own actions and come to self-knowledge.

Jesus addresses the teachers of the Law: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, for you shut the Kingdom of Heaven in people's faces! You do not enter yourselves, nor allow those who wish to enter to go in" (Mt 23:13). Even if you fulfill all

prescriptions, you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven, for you do not fill your heart with virtues and do not change in your inner essence. You merely observe external practices and attempt through them to construct certain schemes and rituals in your relationship with God.

In Christ's understanding, what matters is not only our actions but also the action of the Holy Spirit, who alone can lead a person to Heaven. Ritual practices are generally good and worthy of observation, yet—as we see in the example of the Pharisees—they are superficial and incomplete. Jesus desires instead that people come to God under the influence of the Holy Spirit, inspired by good deeds.

Our goal is to yield more and more to the action of the Holy Spirit. From a human perspective, this is neither easy nor simple. Christ shows us the path and gives us all that is necessary so that we may walk it. Jesus knows our weak nature, sees our sins, and takes them upon Himself. He takes them with one purpose: to free us from this burden and make us perfect children of God, that we may live holy and righteous lives.

If we learn to live without hostility, then nothing will touch us—nothing will influence our mind or heart. If our thoughts are many and scattered, it means we still react with passion. When we learn to remain in peace and to refrain from reacting passionately, then everything will serve to sanctify us. Therefore let us never allow our heart to depart from this peace and love. How do we do this? By not reacting according to passion.

If our thoughts and deeds do not belong to God, then inevitably they belong to the world. Jesus desires that we be holy and saved. Therefore our thoughts and actions must be those that lead to God. All our words, thoughts, and feelings must fulfill Christ's teaching, which directs us toward holiness, unites us with God, and creates harmony within and without. As in the past, so now, Jesus desires our holiness and salvation—our deep rootedness in God. And this is why peacemakers are called children of God: because, like their Father, they do His will.

25. SERVICE

Jesus proclaimed a new ethic, teaching: “If anyone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (Mt 5:40–41). A mile was a Roman unit measuring about one and a half kilometers. Christ took this example from a Roman law in occupied Judea, according to which Roman soldiers had the right to compel citizens to carry their equipment for the distance of one mile—but, by rule, no more than that. In practice, however, the Romans were often unjust and abused this right. For the Jews this was humiliating; they disliked serving their occupiers.

Jesus tells the Jews: “Do and observe all that they tell you” (Mt 23:3). And later He adds: if more is required of you than what is written in the law, do even that.

The meaning is this: if someone violates your will, demands that you surrender something or perform something you do not wish to do, then for the sake of Jesus—do it. If you do not want to perform some task because, like the Jew, you find it humiliating to serve a Roman (for he is proud), nevertheless do it. Jesus teaches that in God’s eyes pride is far worse than what the Roman does to you. Pride causes more harm before God than the act of the Roman, because pride is a vice. It distances a person from God and from the influence of the Holy Spirit.

26. WHY WITHDRAW INTO SOLITUDE

It is important to find time for solitude so as not to lose inner peace. You are where you are, because God is everywhere. Yes, it is true that God is in your heart and also in the place where He has set you. Precisely there God has chosen you and placed you on His knees as a father places a child. Every person seeks fullness. That fullness is already in the heart. Each of us is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of what we feel, God is always with us.

To remain in close union with God, certain truths must be accepted: He always calls us; He will certainly give what we need; and this union with Him will come not immediately, but with time. Let us be patient. The main thing is not to become upset or anxious that we do not yet feel this union. God is always with us, but we need time to begin living in this union.

27. READINESS FOR CHANGE

One of the Gospel parables tells of a man who found a treasure hidden in a field. Realizing how precious the treasure was, he said: “I want to have that treasure.” What did he do? He had little money, so he sold all he possessed. “He goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Mt 13:44). The law held that the treasure belonged to whoever owned the land on which it was found. Thus the man became the owner of the land, and then of the treasure.

The treasure is God, the Heavenly Kingdom. What does the man—who represents each of us—do when he wants to grow and be rich in God? He sells everything he has. This episode is analogous to the saying: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (Jn 12:24). We must surrender everything that belongs to us and die to ourselves in order to gain God. God possesses everything; thus, in attaining Him, we possess all things.

The highest treasure requires the highest death—not physical death, but death to our sinful way of life, a kind of mystical death. It is the death of the human mode of existence so that we may begin to live according to the divine mode of being. Yet if a person finds their treasure on this earth, their heart will remain here. They will never want to give up what they have—whatever they consider their earthly treasure. If I have love and attachment to anything in this world, then be sure I am bound to it.

Someone may claim that I impose my convictions on others, for perhaps someone does not want to live such a life united with God. I am convinced that every person has within the soul the desire to be with God. For each of us is

created in the image and likeness of God, and consciously or not seeks the Creator. Yet we are accustomed to thinking and acting in a human way. But again I repeat: when we die to the human way of living here on earth, we do not lose anything truly valuable. Rather, we come to something greater.

What we consider valuable here on earth becomes a barrier to something higher. But only what is higher gives true fullness. We must realize that what comes to us from above is more important and more precious. In it there is more truth about what we ought to have or do. Yet fear and uncertainty arise concerning growth. We think we possess something firm here on earth and fear letting go of this human security. We are also somewhat lazy regarding change, or we think nothing needs to change, or we postpone it. This is all temptation.

28. WHAT ARE OUR FRUITS?

The seed is the human person. The seed is also the Word of God.

If a person does not undergo inner change and remains in sin, they will not bear fruit. And the fruits are good deeds that arise from the inner person—from the heart: I will act according to what I carry within my heart.

Our actions are always rooted in God. As we love God, so we will love other people, for my attitude toward God shapes both my inner and my outer state. As I love God, so shall I love others. To bear fruit means to give what God Himself gives: to love and to receive others—this is the greatest thing we can do.

If we truly seek God and desire to grow in Him, we ascend the steps of life—meaning, we make effort and work in order to acquire fruits. Then, at the proper time, we feel within ourselves a state of clarity, joy, and peace. Having reached a certain level, we experience joy and peace, for we see the fruits of our own growth in perfection.

Chapter IV: Virtues

29. WHAT ARE VIRTUES?

Virtues are love itself expressed in concrete action. Every virtue is an act of love. Christ, addressing His disciples, teaches that they are the light of the world. Light always shows the path that leads to God; it reveals the way of truth. People illumined by God's light always behave positively toward others. Through them the Holy Spirit speaks and acts. Christ inspires them, and they become a light for the world, showing by their words and their lives the road toward the light. He says that whoever fulfills His teaching is the light of the world (Mt 5:14), and those who do not fulfill it He urges to repent and take the path of holiness.

Virtues are those qualities and dispositions through which “love loves”—the means by which God loves through us. Virtues lead inward, to the heart, not outward. The lowest degree of love is to feel no hostility, for when there is no hostility, no passion lives within us, and we remain in a state of God's grace.

Virtues are acts of love. Patience, gentleness, truthfulness, humility, obedience—these and others are listed in the Letters to the Galatians and Corinthians.

Christ revealed His spiritual teaching not merely by instructing how to develop virtues or become more moral. He pointed to something far greater. He desires that we be formed as persons, as sons and daughters of God. He teaches that we are to become entirely like Him, as far as human nature allows.

Acting virtuously is not the ultimate goal of the Christian. It is part of the spiritual path. The further goal for the person striving for perfection is to become a child of God and act as the Son of God acts.

We speak about the importance of living virtuously. If we grow spiritually and sin less, we grow in virtue. When we grow in any virtue, we become different

people. Virtues are simply the instruments that lead us to union with God. Christ taught us how to live morally, and at the same time commanded that we become perfect as God is perfect. Therefore, a natural question arises: what is more important—our moral life, or that which leads us to union with God?

30. LOVE

Only love is truly effective. Only love truly convinces others. Only love enables us to receive another person, allowing that person to feel safe. Every virtue is love in action. And love is God—God’s nature, the Holy Spirit living within the human person.

When love acts fully, it answers evil with good, does so patiently, without anger, and forgives offenses. In that moment we are filled with the Holy Spirit. This is, so to speak, God’s reward. We receive God’s love, pass it on to others—and they, too, become filled with it. We can teach others only when we are gentle, filled with love and the Holy Spirit, as St. Paul says: *“It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”* (Gal 2:20)

If we respond to situations with love, we sense God’s presence. It is the same with our actions. When we act out of love, we first experience that love ourselves and fill our subconscious with it.

God acts in love not as a human acts. He acts in the dimension of eternity. His understanding of love and justice unfolds over years, reaching into the future unseen by us.

St. Paul describes love broadly in 1 Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 13:4–7). He emphasizes that love is patient, and we Christians must become patient. Love is gentle. The Holy Spirit is always gentle. He speaks gently, never forces, but lovingly inclines us toward good deeds, for only in free choice is there merit. Love is not envious; it always gives, even at personal cost.

Love is not boastful; it does not exalt itself above others. It inspires good thoughts and deeds, yet humans often attribute these things to themselves. Love is not puffed up. The more we know God, the gentler we become.

Which is greater: gentleness or force? The world has its desires and passions. The gentle have no such desires—they give everything. Love always loves and always gives for the good of the other.

God loves us and desires that we learn not to sin. He never withdraws from us. Therefore, we must learn to receive His love. Love does not behave rudely, does not seek its own advantage, does not give way to anger—for anger is a passion opposed to love. Love does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

31. LOVE FOR ENEMIES

Can we love our enemies—those who wish to destroy our well-being and our national existence? What will our love accomplish in the present situation of war?

First, we must remember Christ's words: "*Love your enemies.*" (Mt 5:44). This is a universal divine law. "*Make friends quickly with your opponent while you are on the way with him...*" (Mt 5:25)—words spoken near the Sea of Galilee.

If our enemies accepted Christ, their actions would be different. Christ foretold that Jerusalem would be destroyed (cf. Mt 24:2). In A.D. 70, the Romans destroyed the Temple and the city itself. Later, in A.D. 130, a second revolt against Rome led to massive slaughter and the destruction of 50 towns and 985 villages. All Jews were expelled from Jerusalem; Emperor Hadrian even forbade Jewish men from entering it. Had they accepted Christ and His teaching, His divine power and justice would have prevented the disaster.

Historically, Jerusalem fell because the Zealots violently resisted Rome. The Romans were too powerful, and the Jews could not defeat them. Had they

accepted Christ the Messiah, His love would have preserved the city and, eventually, turned away the Romans.

Christ said, “*You have heard that it was said: love your neighbor and hate your enemy.*” (Mt 5:43). Hatred means refusing to accept the enemy. In Christ’s time, Jewish law often treated non-Jews more harshly than Jews. Christ taught: “*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*” (Mt 5:44). An enemy is someone who does harm to us—great or small. Our inner response to that person creates passion within us, and by our negative reaction we ourselves turn that person into an “enemy.”

When someone does evil to us, that person sins against us. But if we return evil for evil, then we become like that person. Christ urges: “*Pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven.*” (Mt 5:44–45).

The Heavenly Father has no enemies. Those who oppose Him do so by their own choice. Yet God always loves: *He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.* (Mt 5:45)

It is not required that we agree with evil. God does not approve of sin, yet He continues to love the sinner. We may correct others gently, admonish privately, oppose falsehood, and resist injustice—but always acting out of love.

32. ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is the first step of love. I accept everything that life gives me, because ultimately it is the Lord who gives it out of His love for me, and therefore I accept it. What happens then? It is easy to accept what pleases me, what brings joy, upliftment, what I agree with and in which I feel comfortable. But how do we accept problems, pains, sufferings, inconveniences? We do not naturally love these things, and therefore we resist them. Yet when we nevertheless accept them, the feelings that resist them do not manifest.

God always listens to us and gives what we truly need. For example: I want a car and say, “Lord, give me a car.” God sees my desire. He also sees that if I receive a car, I will become proud and exalt myself over others. Therefore, He does not give it. But I continue insistently to ask for the car... Then the Lord says: This is my son, he asks so earnestly! Very well, I will give him a car—but I will ensure that when he receives it, he does not fall into pride, because I must make him pure. So the Lord sends trials to a person until he becomes sanctified, until he becomes free from passion. And after our death God will ask what we did with what we so passionately requested, and how we used it. Therefore it is important to understand this in due time and to accept it.

In the Sermon on the Mount Christ accepts everyone, unlike the Pharisees who imposed conditions, demanding strict observance of laws connected especially with external practices—such as refraining from certain meats or immersing in the *mikveh* after becoming ritually unclean, particularly after touching a leper, which prevented attending the service until evening. One had first to undergo ritual washing in water that was considered, in our Christian understanding, blessed. In immersion, all impurity—according to Pharisaic belief—was purified. The scribes had countless such rituals and believed that their observance would grant them Heaven. But in truth, what God desires is not the mere keeping of rituals, but a pure and contrite heart.

33. PEACE

Peace is the first step toward perfect love. The word *peace* appears many times in both the Old and New Testaments. The peace with which Christ greeted the apostles when He appeared to them after His Resurrection holds a special significance. It is the first sensation that touches the heart when the Holy Spirit envelops a person.

If we compare peace to nature, it is like the first touch of early spring sunlight, whose rays give a gentle warmth. Just as the warmth of the sun’s rays is a sign of

its presence, so peace is the first radiance—a sign of God's touch upon the heart and soul. Peace is the very essence of the Creator, the quality in which He dwells and which He imparts to His creatures.

Peace is the harmony in which God dwells when we draw near to Him. Peace is an ethical principle guiding our conduct and a righteous state in which we ought to remain. Peace creates harmonious relationships among people, reflecting God's harmony. In its very nature, harmony and peace originate from God. Peace is, above all, a spiritual reality—a bond that unites us in God and with God. Thus peace becomes an important principle, for through it we accomplish God's action and become like Him. Peace is a divine attribute.

In Christ's teaching, peace is presented as a divine sign, an intrinsic mark of God's eternity. Therefore, when peace unites us on earth, it leads us to God, from whom it shines forth. It is the path to the Kingdom of Heaven, guarding us from judgment and destruction, and preserving us in God. If someone is not in peace—if peace does not act within him—such a person is not united with God. The peace that unites surpasses the meaning and limits of ordinary good relations. To be in peace means to be in God.

When God touches us, the first thing we feel is peace—Divine peace. Christ bestowed this peace upon the apostles when He breathed the Holy Spirit upon them; the touch of the Spirit is peace. If a person acquires more peace, he becomes more filled with love.

Very often one person can take away another's peace. Therefore, to remain in peace, I must remain in God, who cannot be shaken by others. The less a person reacts to external circumstances, the more he grows in humility. His reward will be that he attains this inner simplicity.

The peace about which Christ speaks surpasses the usual idea of harmony. He teaches that the true root of peace—its real form and essence—comes from God. In Christ's teaching, peace refers above all to that which leads to eternal reality: a peace that is a deep, unchanging state of the soul, which opens the

first paths to God and keeps the person in Him. This peace inspires actions that lead to Heaven, for it comes from there.

34. DEMANDINGNESS

From time to time we fall into the temptation of being demanding toward someone. In doing so, we fail to realize that within love there is justice, which acts according to God's plan. Often we do not see our own faults. There is no justification for sin, because passion can never produce true good.

The Holy Spirit never *demand*s anything, but only prompts and very gently nudges, always leaving us free. That is why it is so important that we interiorly form in ourselves this same disposition for our whole life, after the example of Jesus.

We are often convinced by experience that when we want to instruct someone insistently, we either never succeed, or succeed only very rarely. If we act with passion, our neighbor perceives this and the passion passes over to him. The person whom we educate harshly and passionately receives our instruction as something directed *against* him; therefore he rebels. Only very rarely does harshness and passion help to correct faults. More often they only form a negative inner disposition in the person.

As for punishment, in the New Testament we understand it as a correction in love. St. Paul the Apostle teaches: "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right" (Eph 6:1). "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4).

35. Simplicity

Christ exalts those who are simple in heart, because God Himself is simple. A person has no obstacle to understanding God—provided there is the will. He is easy to comprehend, unlike the human being, with all his contradictory traits. The problem is that, because of our inner complexity, we cannot grasp the

divine simplicity, the simplicity of the Holy Spirit. We do not understand that everything in this world rests upon love. Christ says that the simple and humble grieve over their sins, thirst for mercy and goodness, love everyone, and in this they resemble God. Simplicity of heart, divine simplicity—these are inseparably bound to the Creator and united with Him. They make us children of God.

To grow in spiritual simplicity, we must learn increasingly to give away and renounce our human habits, approaches, and viewpoints, with which we may have lived our whole life and to which we have grown accustomed. When we are told to surrender these, we do not readily wish to do so, for all of this is our *self*. Thus divine simplicity has its price: the old person must die, and the new be born.

We must surrender what is human in us in order to receive what is divine and attain simplicity. When someone angers us, we often lose patience—and thus strengthen the human element in us. But when a person does something bad to us and we do not react outwardly or inwardly, we remain in peace and simplicity, because that person has not awakened passion within us.

We are easily drawn to respond on the human, emotional level, to react to everything, because we are used to this. If we always, again and again, react in this way, we accumulate passion within ourselves. Therefore it is so important to act and respond in peace and simplicity, regardless of whether someone slanders us or does us harm. If we renounce ourselves, then we remain in simplicity. It is not easy to give up our human dignity, competence, and sense of importance. That is why, no matter what others say or do to us, we must strive not to lose this simplicity.

When, in time of trial, a person remains in peace and does not react to passions, that person is richest in God. Spiritual simplicity is something very beautiful—innocent and pure.

36. JUSTICE

There are different forms of justice: Old Testament justice (“eye for eye, tooth for tooth”), justice of the state (based on human laws)... Every person has his own understanding of justice. But true justice is that which comes from the Holy Spirit.

Christ does not point to particular rules and laws as the way to teach the apostles the true orientation toward the Kingdom of Heaven. He shows that purely human, intellectual principles are insufficient; they do not lead to holiness. Thus, when Christ speaks about anger, saying: “You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill’” (Mt 5:21), He has in mind not only physical murder, but also wounding another person by word, by thought, by passion.

In the time of Christ, murderers were brought before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court. Christ Himself was twice brought before judges: first before the Jewish high priest Caiaphas, head of the court and of the Temple, and then before the Roman court of Pontius Pilate. Pilate was the judge representing Roman justice, but his judgment over Christ did not conform to the dignity of a bearer and executor of Roman justice.

Both Caiaphas and Pilate failed to follow either Jewish or Roman judicial norms and condemned the Innocent. But Christ went further: He taught not only “do not kill,” but also “do not be angry with your brother.”

When Christ says that He came to fulfill the Law, He wishes to reveal its fullness. Fulfillment of the Law in the divine sense is expressed in His words that unless our justice surpasses the justice of the Pharisees—which is, in essence, purely human—we will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

Justice is impossible without love. If we say something even objectively just, but without love—in anger or hostility—no one will accept it. In a state of passion

a person either defends himself or attacks. Only love enables us to accept someone's passionate behavior. That is why love is the greatest teacher of justice.

37. SELF-RESTRAINT

A self-restrained person overcomes many sins at once. When someone learns to control the stomach, he will more easily overcome other passions. Likewise with love: where it grows, sin decreases; and where there is less love, sin increases.

It is important to restrain ourselves in evil thoughts. Both good and evil thoughts reach another person. Each person has a certain energetic "field." People sense each other on a mental level. This energetic field is something natural; nevertheless, God can transform it and have complete influence over everything.

The human spirit is very active and productive. It is constantly bustling about. Not all of this is bad, but it is very restless and concerned with worldly things. It generates human vibrations that distance us from the Holy Spirit.

A person acting under the influence of this human vibration may feel quite well, because such is his earthly mode of existence. But a spiritual person, who discerns spirits, will recognize that not everything there is pure. When we evaluate and make decisions solely on the basis of the human spirit, this spirit deviates from God. Human judgment built only on perception and experience will be faulty. Only the Holy Spirit possesses the fullness of truth.

We also recognize the spirit of Satan by certain marks. When a person is possessed, then through his passions he enters the realm of Satan. The devil naturally uses a person's weaknesses in order to deceive him. At the same time, when someone is filled with the Holy Spirit, evil can do nothing to him. Yet

there are cases when, for a person's sanctification, God permits the attacks of the devil—as in the case of Job.

Much about a person is revealed by the eyes. The eyes are the windows of the soul; they express all that is within and reflect energy, being connected to the nervous system. Therefore the eyes show much of what is in the person. When we learn to control our human nature and, in particular, our energy, we then communicate this to other people.

If a person is unrestrained, very passionate, this is evident in the eyes; we can see that the person is angry and agitated. But the eyes of a saint perceive heaven, God—something very gentle, and a great calm. The eyes reveal the essence of the person.

38. SACRIFICIAL LOVE

In the Old Testament, a lamb was sacrificed for human sin. In the New Testament, the Lord, as an innocent, pure Lamb offered for the sin of Israel, dies on the Cross. Christ burns up—destroys—the sin of humanity on the Cross. Yet He has commanded that we do all that He has done. He accomplished this at a particular historical moment—on the Cross, through bodily martyrdom.

We do not have to die as He did. What He desires from us is that we pass through a mystical death, leading us to die to sin and be ever more united with God. Union with God—being like Him, like Jesus Christ—is the highest perfection for us.

We wholly offer ourselves and our sins upon the altar of the Holy Spirit, where the fire is the Holy Spirit Himself. Let the Holy Spirit burn us as fire burns wood—completely. This means that we are totally given over to Him. It is God Himself who transforms and consumes, and thus we become united with Him. It is then no longer we who live, but God in us. In other words, we die to sin, become pure in heart, our sinful humanity is dissolved, and we are united with God.

In the atom there are electrons and a nucleus composed of nucleons—protons and neutrons. The proton retains energy and heat. In terms of our transformation, this function is fulfilled by the Holy Spirit. When a person is in such a state, he is alive like pure energy.

On the Cross, Christ is perfect. His human nature is entirely wounded and mutilated. All mock Him, beat Him, and spit on Him. Yet on the Cross Christ no longer merely *speaks* about God; He *shows* Him in His own person. He shows God by manifesting forgiveness and the unceasing love of God, in whom there is no passion. Christ teaches us and expects that we will also be perfect in love in every circumstance of our life.

Love requires the death of our *self*. As long as this self rules, we are unable to live and act in love; we cannot place anyone else in the center, because we ourselves remain there. When our self dies, we receive the divine “I.” Then we are able always, everywhere, and in all circumstances to love as God always loves.

In the Old Testament we read how the Jewish priests offered a lamb upon the altar. This lamb had to be entirely consumed by fire. For us, this fire is now the Holy Spirit, and the lamb is ourselves. We must fully entrust ourselves to God and give Him all our problems and difficulties, for any anxious worry is not from God.

39. PATIENCE

Ordinary patience and patience in God differ essentially.

Patience in God sanctifies a person and fills him with the Holy Spirit. In this way, through all of this, a spiritual person is formed. This means that in such a case the heart loves more, and the mind has a deeper contact with God.

Then we act more under the influence of God; we receive wise, God-given thoughts and an understanding of which decisions to make. Then we no longer act under the influence of sin, and passion no longer clouds the mind, for it acts in the Holy Spirit. It is already so close to God that it clearly sees how God

Himself would act in this or that situation, for there is an understanding of how a person inspired by God will act—and God cannot make a mistake. Conversely, if we are dominated by sin, then between God and our mind there appears something like a fog, a darkness, even clouds—just as the sun always shines, but the clouds cover it. Then it becomes darker, and the sun’s activity is diminished, because the clouds do not allow its rays to penetrate.

Indeed, we have various problems, pains, sufferings, injustices. And yet, on the other hand, we speak of God’s love, of the fact that God is love. How are we to understand this? Many cultures and religions have faced the same problem. For non-believers this is one of the most difficult questions: how can sufferings and the love of God coexist? Why does a good person suffer and endure, and seem somehow “the least,” as we read in the Book of Job? While someone who sins often appears to be well off and successful in life. How can this be?

The answer is this: God loves everyone; He loves both the humble “little one” and the one who sins, who is ambitious, materialistic, and acts dishonestly. What, then, happens? The one who is dishonest acquires here on earth his own existence-kingdom. Through his desires he obtains what he seeks. And the other, at first glance, attains nothing. It seems to us that he remains without success in this world. Life takes this or that away from him. But what is actually happening? Yes, God loves all, but this world is often in the hands of passionate people. For this world is human—it functions on a material, passionate foundation. However, as Christ says: “Thus the last shall be first, and the first last” (Mt 20:16). The last are those who act on the basis of love. Here, on earth, we shall not always receive a reward or success. Look only at Jesus Christ—at His birth and His death—and you will understand that the true reward awaits us in the Kingdom of Heaven.

St Luke says that by our endurance we shall gain our souls (cf. Lk 21:19). The truly patient person is the one who, regardless of what you say or do to him, never reacts with passion. For he will always remain in peace and will always behave patiently. He accepts everything; that is why there is no passionate

movement in him and thus he possesses the highest virtue—love. He already abides in God.

We must learn from Jesus Christ, who accepted everything. They insulted Him, scourged Him, and finally crucified Him—yet He accepted it all. Such was, and is, the patience of God. We must be aware that we experience two “laws.” One of them touches us bodily—then we feel restlessness, tension, hardness; in this case it is important to learn to be patient, to know how to respond to difficulties. In such moments, let us recall how much injustice people showed towards Jesus Christ, how much evil they did to Him, and yet He never reacted with passion. Whether we are truly patient is revealed in the time of our trials.

40. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH

We, as spiritual persons, ought to build our lives in the Holy Spirit, on the basis of eternity and heaven. There is a human, subjective understanding of what truth is, and there is the spiritual understanding of truth in the Holy Spirit. These two differ essentially. That is why the state, as a secular subject, is separated from religion. Religion penetrates more deeply; it knows God more and therefore possesses a fuller understanding of truth. In every religion people seek God, for all are created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, consciously or unconsciously, they seek their Creator. In Christianity we no longer seek God in that same way, for He Himself, out of love, has come to us. Even though the world often continues to live in its own way, we Christians are not of this world; we build our lives in the Holy Spirit.

One of the criteria of truth is that “the last will be first, and the first last” (Mt 20:16). Who is this “last one”? It is the one who lives by eternity, who does not consider himself important, who has no human ambitions. The world and people defend and strive to possess what is human; yet the truth is that the last will be first. The last is the one who peacefully accepts everything. The person who is peaceful and humble is full of the Holy Spirit, and therefore he will be first. For here the measure is the share of divinity present in the concrete person.

There is no greater truth than the truth that the Lord is the source of truth. The Father is the source, the beginning of all, and He has revealed the Son as the source and foundation of everything. Christ is the way, the truth, and the life.

Jesus brought a kind of revolution, for He builds religion on the basis of the perfection of the person. The human person is united with God and grows in perfection, which is realized (manifested) in becoming as Christ, and not in becoming “perfect” merely on the basis of a cult that one performs. This is one of the revolutions that Jesus accomplished in relation to the Jewish cult. He knew well that the earthly Temple would be destroyed and the priesthood would pass away. Now Jesus Christ tells us that *we* are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

41. GRATITUDE

In every situation we must accept God, understand what is essential, and be grateful for it. Likewise, in every event the important thing is that God sends it and, through it, sanctifies us. Therefore let us give thanks to Him for everything. Let us accept every action He performs at this moment, for it is for our sanctification. Let us accept God in the reality that we have, for it is always God’s sanctifying work for us.

It is important simply to thank God that He sends these or those circumstances, for through them I am filled with the Holy Spirit—with grace, with God’s favor. We should rejoice despite all injustices and problems. When all of us become aware of God’s goodness, this awareness resounds as gratitude.

It is important to say: “Thank You, Lord, that You always love me; You are always with me, You never leave me.” Wherever we are present, there God is also present. He is like the air. When we understand this, we will pray about what the heart says or what we are thinking. If, for example, we think about our mother, who is unwell, we will immediately say a prayer for her. Or we will sense that we wish to be in silence with God—and we will pray for this.

Whatever happens in life, let us always say to ourselves: “God is acting in order to sanctify me!” Then we no longer think about, nor focus on, what others are doing to us; we remember only God, who acts through a given person, and we give thanks that He grants such an opportunity for sanctification.

When we begin, out of gratitude, to perceive all events, then these events no longer touch us. We no longer perceive them as evil, but as something through which God wishes to sanctify us. Through these events God loves us and conforms us to Himself. Then we thank Him—and every event becomes a grace. The more painful and bitter the event or some evil is, the more deeply, humanly speaking, it wounds us interiorly. That is why post-traumatic syndrome (PTS) arises. Precisely for this reason it is so important to learn to accept in peace all that life—God—sends us for our sanctification and salvation.

Let us remember that even in the most painful situations we are dealing not so much with a particular person as with God: “You have permitted this! Very well—thank You, Lord!” And then we are filled with love. What a given person has done is, in fact, secondary—it no longer touches me. For when I gratefully accept everything, I am filled with God’s love and act toward the person with this very love.

Chapter V: Sin and Its Consequences

42. SIN

Sin is not only a moral-ethical offense; it is something greater, for it is a distancing of oneself from God. We distance ourselves from God when we sin. God, however, never distances Himself from us, never ceases to love us or forgive us, nor to shine upon us with His light, His holiness, and His love. He does this eternally. As Christ taught, God loves both the righteous and the sinner, and sends His rain and His sun upon the good and the evil alike. Thus God always sends—rather, always gives—us His grace, which proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

We are born inclined toward sin: “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps. 50:7). Having inherited original sin from Adam and Eve, we have within us a tendency toward evil. Therefore, not always but at times, we commit something wrong, even unknowingly. Yet when we fall into sin, let us not lose heart; rather, let us rise and learn from that sin so that we may not sin again. If this process of increasing sinfulness is not stopped, then the image of God in the human person becomes ever more distorted by sin.

Sin dwells within us and affects us in such a way that we forget God. Sin acts so that God’s light does not reach us—does not reach our will, our mind, or our heart. When we experience sin, we turn away from God and lose the desire for spiritual life. Sin makes us more material, distancing us from divine grace. Although grace is always present in our soul, by sinning we estrange ourselves from it. God always loves the human person; however, when the person sins, she turns away from God—that is, from the action of the Holy Spirit.

Every sin contains within it a human attachment to something of this world, some particular interest. When we break the hooks of attachment, that passion then leaves us. Thoughts and distractions always lead to anxiety and worry over the past or the future, and they tie us to this sinful world.

When we commit a small, everyday sin, we to some degree distance ourselves from God's influence and from the Holy Spirit. In that case, sin affects us more strongly than the Holy Spirit does. But when we fall into mortal sin, we depart from the Lord so far that divine grace scarcely acts upon us. In such a condition we are entirely consumed by sin. Grace surrounds us, but our mind, heart, will, thoughts, and subconscious remain under the influence of the sin that has overtaken us, and God can no longer act within us. In this way different forms of sin hinder divine grace from acting. Yet we must remember that the Holy Spirit is always with us.

A servant of God is very sensitive to sin. The depth of this sensitivity determines the depth of his spiritual experience and perception of divine love. If a person is sensitive to God and united with Him, then sin—even the smallest—seems great and wounds the soul as any evil does. The righteous person is so closely united with God, so aware of Him and His love, that even the least trace of sin greatly troubles him.

It is important to know and understand the levels of sinfulness and the degrees of struggle against sin. There is an entire philosophy and psychology of sinfulness. This is the state of a person who does not wish to grow, who fails to see clearly what lies within, and who does not much desire to change. Often we have attachments to the material, for it is visible. A person may intellectually desire holiness, yet remain enclosed within her own reality and therefore not grow spiritually.

All of us are to some extent captive to our own mind. Because of the deception the mind produces, we fall into temptations, distractions, and sinful passions. This self-deception of the intellect binds us to the life of this world. On the one hand, our thoughts and knowledge do not free us from what is merely human; on the other hand, our feelings do the same. We instinctively defend all that is human within us, believing that this—our natural, emotional self—is the whole of the person. We often perceive the spiritual dimension of our being as a threat to our identity, which has been formed solely by material existence.

43. PRIDE

Pride is a passion, a sin, a defect; and every passion, sin, or defect has an opposite virtue. The virtue opposed to pride is humility; likewise, obedience stands opposed to disobedience, which is a passion, and patience stands opposed to impatience. Every passion is incompatible with virtue, just as darkness is incompatible with light—because if you turn on only one lamp, you have less light than if you turn on two. When a person grows in the virtue of patience, he becomes filled with it and becomes less impatient.

Christ teaches that if a person serves impatience or pride, then at the same time he cannot be patient or humble. Jewish law of that period did not allow one to serve two masters. Christ took this familiar civil precept and transformed it into a beautiful example that clearly and accessibly revealed God's understanding of perfection.

An example of fighting pride is St. Simeon Stylite.

He ate nothing—only one small portion of greens per week, and even that solely so he would not fall into pride over eating nothing at all. Likewise, he refused to sleep, but lest he become proud of not sleeping, he allowed himself two hours of sleep per week. Yet to reach such a state, one must first strip away passions.

Many earthly things can make us proud and hinder our spiritual progress. They bind us and create distrust. For example: money. If money makes us proud, how will the Lord entrust us with the gift of governing nature, the gift of wisdom, prophecy? If we cannot master ourselves in small things, how will God entrust us with great things? Christ taught: “If you are not faithful in small things, who will entrust you with greater?” (cf. Lk. 16:10–12).

44. DIVORCE

In the time of Christ, there were very many divorces. It was a common phenomenon. Marriages dissolved quickly, and divorce certificates were issued readily. Marriage in those days was not a sacrament of the Church; it was a worldly contract between families. Consent between a man and a woman did not necessarily require a priest, and therefore divorces occurred swiftly.

However, Christ opposed divorce. Divorce is always born of passions, for one can live in harmony with any person provided that person possesses the appropriate virtues. Everything depends on us—on what is within us. If we are possessed by passion and someone harms us, we will act against that person; but if passion is absent, and someone wrongs us, we will meet that person with love. Christ desires that we understand this truth.

45. ANGER

“Be angry, but do not sin” (cf. Eph. 4:26). These words come from the Old Testament. At that time, the Jews did not yet have the concept of love that Christ would teach. Christ brought a teaching on love that went far beyond anything found in the Old Testament. In the narratives of the Old Covenant, killings of people are mentioned frequently—events that, in the light of the New Testament, would be morally unacceptable.

Ordinarily feelings arise in us first, and only then thought, for feeling gives birth to thought. For example, thought says: “No... No! Christ tells me not to act this way, not to be angry at him, for that is a passion...” For a feeling to arise, it must be affirmed by my thought. If my thought does not agree with the feeling, the feeling cannot live and dies quickly.

We feel anger toward a person when we judge them. Christ says: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Mt. 7:1). We must not judge our neighbor. Then anger does not arise. When we simply evaluate a situation, anger is absent. In such a case we may even speak the truth openly without judgment.

Modern civilization—like the “noonday demon”—burdens, crushes, and weakens a person, provoking anger. The world tries to settle within us, to seize what is divine in us when our will to pray weakens, when awareness of God’s presence fades, and when the heart becomes heavy and insensitive. Then the body, becoming more material, grows tense—and we become impatient, quick to anger, and the power of love leaves us. The world, with its influence, claims the person, forcing her to act according to its rules.

If we do not reject anger but keep it within us, it becomes established inside. We may win an argument, but lose the person. It is better to lose the argument and win the person. All our work is instrumental—but it is not the goal. Christianity consists in forming within ourselves love, virtue, and relationships.

46. MAMMON

Mammon is an Aramaic word meaning “money.”

In the context of Christ’s words, “*either God or mammon,*” it refers first of all to attachment to things, for “*where your treasure is, there will your heart be also*” (Mt. 6:21). The visible object that pulls us away from God is *mammon*. If money represents the devil—meaning, if it pushes us to acquire wealth dishonestly—then we create a sinful reality that belongs to the devil. The devil is the root of all sin, the central metaphysical evil acting upon the human person to distance her from the Lord.

Christ approved of honestly earned money. He said: “*Make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous mammon, so that when it fails, they may welcome you into eternal dwellings*” (Lk. 16:9). When we use money to help the poor, those persons will testify on our behalf after death. Christ does not deny

material goods, but He does not approve of hearts attached to wealth—nor does He approve of any form of attachment whatsoever. Scripture describes the wealthy young man attached to his possessions. Christ told him: “*One thing you lack: go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven*” (Mk. 10:21). The young man walked away sorrowful, for he had great wealth. Thus, Christ reveals the spiritual danger of attachment to possessions.

In such matters Christ urges a decisive choice: either mammon or God, for “*no one can serve two masters*” (Mt. 6:24)—the Lord and the world. Very often we Christians want to have both God and a worldly lifestyle, constantly trying to combine them. But it is impossible: it is either God or mammon.

Money frequently pushes a person toward dishonesty, for it creates passion—a desire to possess continually more. Those who run businesses are in particular danger, as they face constant temptation to act unjustly. I personally know several Ukrainian businessmen who achieved success honestly and are genuine Christian men, yet they became dissatisfied with commercial life because of the dishonesty and deceit within it; thus they left business altogether.

Christ said: “*How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven*” (cf. Mt. 19:24). Why did the Lord use this comparison? Let me explain.

The walls of Jerusalem had twelve gates, symbolizing the twelve tribes of Israel. At night all the gates were shut out of fear of attack. Only one narrow, very small gate remained open—a gate through which a person could easily enter. This gate was called the Eye of the Needle. Jerusalem was full of shops and markets. Merchants arrived on horses, camels, and donkeys. If they came late, only the Eye of the Needle was open. A person could pass through it easily, but a camel could only pass through with difficulty: its burdens had to be removed, the camel lowered to its knees, and pushed tightly through the narrow gate.

47. MAY WE JUDGE OTHERS?

“Why do you look at the speck in your brother’s eye?” (Lk. 6:41).

If you truly wish to judge others, then be pure—be holy. Remove passion from yourself, and only then will your thinking be correct. But if you judge others, you sin, for judgment is a passion. Moreover, when I judge, I harm my own nervous system. In judging I commit violence against myself.

To evaluate something is different: it means offering a thought, not from the standpoint of my human (passionate) sense of justice, but on the basis of love, on the basis of God. There is no imposition or force. One may gently say: “I think that if you were to do it differently, it might be better.”

How should we act when someone speaks evil about us?

First of all—this is merely the thought of a particular person, nothing more.

Judgment belongs to the Lord, not to man. God grants us strength not to fall under the weight of another’s sin. If someone is angry at me for any reason, that anger is their passion. One reason we fall under the influence of another’s sin is the legacy of original sin. We react quickly to someone who sins against us.

Thus we must remember that God always loves us, regardless of how others receive us. A divine judgment awaits in the future, but the Lord never ceases to love us.

48. THOUGHTS

To think means to *receive* something. For example, we think that a certain person is evil. We accept this thought — and then passion fills us. The person we are speaking about may indeed be evil or angry, but we should not condemn that person in our thoughts or words. For when we say that someone is evil, we ourselves become filled with passion as we judge that person.

One concept is *to judge*; another is *to evaluate*. To evaluate always means to think or to speak with love. In such a case, we are not judging. When we

evaluate a situation or a person, we do not commit a sin but express our opinion. Yet these thoughts or expressions are not filled with malice. We always convey them with words and reveal them with love. This is fundamentally different from when we make a remark to someone in an imperative manner, with negative emotions, passionately.

Jesus emphasized that the principles of the Pharisees were merely human and said to the apostles: *beware of the leaven of the Pharisees!* The apostles did not understand His words. Jesus was warning His disciples to avoid the teaching of the Pharisees, because whoever accepts it is changed by it, just as yeast completely transforms dough. A person who accepts a certain teaching develops certain qualities. This teaching forms the person and makes them who they are. Thus every one of our thoughts over time shapes us into who we are. What a person thinks about — that is what they become.

If a person grows in holiness, they form new emotions and thoughts, because they begin to see and understand certain things within themselves that they had not previously realized. They also begin more consciously to understand the meaning of life, the world around them, and other people. In a word, they grow in wisdom.

However, as a rule, our thoughts bind us to this world, for they deal with today, tomorrow, and yesterday. But for the Son of God there is no passing time — only Eternity. If we rely on God, our feelings and thoughts are interiorly directed toward Him. We pray and seek answers from God, and He always answers! Reflections under the influence of the Holy Spirit begin to produce wise thoughts.

Everything begins with thoughts. As our thoughts are, so are we. Paraphrasing a well-known saying, one might say: tell me what your thoughts are, and I will tell you who you are.

The first type of thoughts are involuntary: they determine what we do and where we go.

The second type are thoughts from God. When a thought comes from God, we

feel good, calm, peaceful, and we do not become irritated.

The third type of thoughts (and these are the majority) are passionate thoughts — those that draw us toward earthly existence. They have no root, no foundation. They can always be cast off.

Thought and emotion are connected. They bring one another forth. Emotions may also precede thought and finally pass into concrete actions.

49. PASSIONS

Words, thoughts, and actions affect us; they shape us as persons.

When we think, we act by means of our mind; when we speak, we act by means of our tongue. In this case, our nervous system is involved, and the will is reflected in the flow of the subconscious. Every action first of all affects *us* *ourselves* as persons, and only after that — anyone else.

When a person becomes angry, he first of all feels this evil himself, because he does something wrong by his thought, by his word, by his will. The will yields to evil, the heart — to passions. A person sins himself, does evil to himself, makes mistakes against himself, commits sin.

When we claim that a person is evil, then a passion that lives within us begins to act, and this forms our attitude toward that person. If we did not have passion, we would remain in peace; we would have no violence toward a person in our thoughts or in our words. As a result — we would have no sin. At the root of judgment there is always a certain violence toward the person we judge.

Passion is our great enemy; it is a sin. It is a negative feeling not native to a person; it is not ours, for we were not born with passions — we acquired them. When the Holy Spirit acts upon us, then we feel that we are able to act in a good way. But when passion acts — we are not. Who directs our actions: the Holy Spirit or passion? What influences me more?

In any situation one can fall and commit sin. Passions constantly change, for we can never be satisfied by passion. Yet it is important to remember that two

forces always act: the Holy Spirit and passion. Through passions we darken ourselves, distance ourselves from God, lose our beauty, gentleness, humility, goodness. In a word, we lose love — our state of love. The one who has many passions may seem more important and prominent in the eyes of the world, but spiritually he is the last. Each time we react with passion, we further establish that passion within ourselves. Jesus wants us in every action to choose life in the Spirit, and not to give in to passion.

Passions are precisely what often characterizes us as human beings. Even a small passion is my desire to have or possess something that gives me human pleasure or delight. It is very small, human — for this is how life works in the world. Yet in the spiritual life we become aware that this is a passion, an attachment to something. Behind every passion is a human attachment to something or someone in this world. And passions manifest themselves the most through our thoughts.

Human ambitions are passions. They are not necessarily bad. For example: parents who ambitiously care for their children, for their material well-being. In the circumstances of the world, such a stance is correct, but if we look deeper, we see that this often becomes an end in itself.

A person wants to have some position, to acquire something material in this world: power, influence, authority. Often our human nature binds us to this world, and so we must, without judging, acknowledge that this is how people mostly live. From a human point of view, this may be normal, but it is an attachment — a small passion.

The world acts and conducts its life on the basis of passions. In the same way, laws of the world are often created on the basis of passions.

Chapter VI: Let Us Preserve One Another for God

50. THE PRESENT PREPARES THE FUTURE

The future is composed and formed in the present, by present moments.

Allow me to say: let us never give in to fear or to any other form of dissatisfaction within ourselves. Jesus said: *“Do not worry about tomorrow”* (Mt. 6:34); the causes of worry are material, and therefore temporary, for they are not from God.

Let us experience each moment in its fullness, because in every moment God is present — the same as He was, is, and will be tomorrow, in a month, in a hundred years...

God does not change. This is a requirement of perfection.

God is perfect; He loves us.

Let us preserve one another for God!

